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Transcript

ABC Radio Brisbane with Madonna King--Inside Canberra with Dr Emerson and Senator George Brandis
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MADONNA KING: Making headlines around the country this morning is the behaviour of a particular Labor MP. Her name is Belinda Neal.

There's even calls this morning for the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, to step in and discipline her.

Belinda Neal and her husband - he's quite senior in the New South Wales Government; he's a Minister - are in trouble over a dinner on Friday night.

Belinda Neal is also in trouble over some of the things she's said in parliament, and her choice of language; and now claims this morning, in Sydney's Daily Telegraph, that she was sent off the soccer pitch and suspended for repeatedly kicking a rival player.

Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government, Dr Craig Emerson, good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: Good morning Madonna, on State of Origin Day.

MADONNA KING: And Opposition Attorney General, Senator George Brandis.
Good morning.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Morning Madonna. Morning Craig.

MADONNA KING: Craig Emerson, are you already trying to change the subject?

CRAIG EMERSON: No. No. I just imagine we'll get onto it by the end of the interview, that's all.

MADONNA KING: I imagine we will. But first, should Belinda Neal be sacked, disciplined, Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: There's conflicting views and accounts in statutory declarations as to what actually happened on that Friday night at the club.

Julia Gillard has already said, on behalf of the Government, as Acting Prime Minister, that she's not happy with developments.

But it's a little difficult to comment, and I know you want me to comment, when there is so much dispute as to what actually did happen.

MADONNA KING: That's fair enough, I guess. But, George Brandis is putting up his hand to comment.

GEORGE BRANDIS:[Laughs]

CRAIG EMERSON: I'll bet he is; I'm sure he is.

MADONNA KING: George Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS:I don't think we should hide behind the old, the old excuse of well there are different accounts of this. There were six statutory declarations that came forward spontaneously from members of the staff. And there's been, you know, an attempt to, to obfuscate a bit by, by those, the staff of Belinda Neal.

But, you don't get six staff at a nightclub spontaneously offering statutory declarations unless something pretty unpleasant happened. And what those staff members are saying is this - that they asked Belinda Neal and her husband - who's a Minister in the New South Wales Labor Government, John Della Bosca - to move from where they were dining.

They were abused. They say that Belinda Neal and John Della Bosca were intoxicated, and they say that Belinda Neal said words to the effect - if, if you, if you try and move us or boss us around, I can use my political influence to make sure that your liquor license is withdrawn.

Now those are the allegations. They are serious allegations, against anyone, but particularly a member of parliament. And this is one of the Labor Party's many power couples - a State Labor Minister and his wife, a Federal Labor MP.

MADONNA KING: I'm going to give you some oxygen here Craig Emerson. I mean, it's not just Labor. The Liberal leader in Western Australia, sniffs chairs.

CRAIG EMERSON: Sure.

MADONNA KING: .your side's not above this. I'm just wondering about the calibre, the behaviour, and it might be just two incidents, but what is the behaviour the public expects of our politician? Is it better than the behaviour they expect of me for example, because you're elected?

CRAIG EMERSON: It probably is. But that's as it should be. We should be setting high standards in our behaviour within the parliament and outside the parliament. It doesn't always happen. There are things called human frailties. I've done it before in the past - made a .

MADONNA KING: What have you done in the past?

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, gee, I, well, you know, I..

MADONNA KING: No, let's be honest. Good on you.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, no, no, I had an exchange with Christopher Pyne that George will remember, and, you know, I probably shouldn't have done that. I was very upset at the time. I regretted it. I talk to Christopher now in the corridors. We say hello. We're very, I wouldn't say we're friends because we just don't see that much of each other, and we're on opposite sides of the Chamber.

But, you know, that's something that happened. I regret that. But, you live and learn and move on.

MADONNA KING: George Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well I agree that members of parliament, and, you know people who hold offices of public trust, not just members of parliament, are held to perhaps a higher standard than, than other members of the community, and that's fair enough, because, for the very reason that they're meant to be exemplars of of certain standards. And, you know, everybody is, as Craig rightly says, a person with human frailties, so they won't, they will on occasions fail to meet those standards. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't be held to them.

MADONNA KING: Alright. We're talking about standards, and it's probably a good segue into binge drinking.

I don't know if either of you saw the *Four Corners* program last night, but it looked at binge drinking - sorry, on Monday night, and I think it was replayed late last night. Binge drinking is defined as 11 drinks in a session for a man, and seven for a woman. Is that a lot? There seems to be very different opinions this morning on 11 drinks in a session as being way too many for a man.

Craig Emerson, have you binge drunk in the last year, based on that definition?

CRAIG EMERSON: Ah, not in the last year, but, I did when I was a young fella, and I have to say though, 11 drinks is a lot. That would be a standard drink, which is a middy of beer. If you have 11 middies of beer, in anything like under three hours for example, I reckon you'd be plastered.

MADONNA KING: Yeah, and seven for a .

CRAIG EMERSON: So that, that is a lot. Yeah. Yeah.

MADONNA KING: .seven for a woman is probably a bottle of wine.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, maybe more I think. Maybe a bottle would be, I don't know, five or six, so, bottle and a half - getting up to a bottle and a half.

You know, if it's over a full day, you would be definitely intoxicated, and definitely shouldn't drive, and probably shouldn't do it.

But if it was over a compressed period of time, you'd be blotto.

MADONNA KING: So are you surprised? You're saying when you were younger you did it. George Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS:I think down at the RE Hotel down the road from here, when I was a uni student I would have, on occasions, had that many beers.

MADONNA KING: And I'm not sure there would be a lot of people who, who may not have, especially if they had gone to university that time of their lives.

So, are we beating this up, saying look our youngsters are down doing this now, or do you think it's actually grown a lot more since any of us were at that..

GEORGE BRANDIS:No, I don't think it's, it's being beaten up. I think that most of your listeners, many perhaps most of whom would be parents, would, are concerned about binge drinking. And, you know, 11 drinks for a male and seven for a women is an enormous quantity of alcohol to ingest.

The Opposition's criticism of what the Government tried to do with alcopops is that it was a bit of a, it was a bit two-faced, because on the one hand it was represented as an attempt to attack the problem of binge drinking though the use of alcopops, which, particularly among teenage girls, I think, was becoming a phenomenon, but certainly, you know, the talk of parents around schools.

But, then, as you said yourself, Madonna, they factored into the forward estimates, an increase in the revenue of \$3.1 billion over the forward estimates. So the plan was, if the forward estimates were right, then this was going to make no dent at all on the purchase of alcopops, because they were assuming that people would pay the additional excise.

Now, what in fact has happened, and this is why we thought that it was a very poorly thought out piece of public policy, is that a lot of teenagers, partic. not just teenagers either - are now instead of buying the alcopops, when at least there is a known and limited quantity of alcohol mixed with the soft drink, are buying spirits, bottles of spirits.

MADONNA KING: All right. Craig Emerson, I want to be fair with you and give you a reply to that, but first I want to ask you the same question about George; do you think it is actually worse with teenagers today than it was when you were a teenager?

CRAIG EMERSON: I think it is. The health experts claim it is, so it's not just greater public awareness. There does seem to be an increased incidence of binge drinking, and the ugly side of that, apart from the damage that it may well do to people's brains and health generally is the violence and..

MADONNA KING: All right.

CRAIG EMERSON: .that I think's, you know, something we should be discussing. Because drunken young people getting into terrible fights and, you know, often getting injured and hurt, that's really bad and very ugly.

MADONNA KING: So onto this alcopops issue..

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, sure.

MADONNA KING: .is there a suggestion, this parliamentary committee is hearing today, you've got all sorts of welfare people fronting it, there has been some anecdotal evidence that kids are going to continue to drink, if not that, perhaps something stronger, perhaps it's older people who can no longer alcopops and it's not working. Would your Government reconsider the alcopops issue if the evidence to this committee shows it should?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, the evidence is, as exists now since the announcement and the introduction of this increase in tax, is that sales of alcopops have dropped by a million.

MADONNA KING: But not necessarily younger people stopping; one thing I read, it could be older people who are no longer buying it.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, it's pretty hard to disentangle, you know, who's buying and who's not, but the assertion by George and the Coalition is that there would be no reduction in usage. Now, there is a reduction.

GEORGE BRANDIS:[Interrupts] No, that's your assumption, Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: No, no.

GEORGE BRANDIS:That's not our assertion, that's your assumption in your own Budget.

CRAIG EMERSON: It's not. George. George, that is not the case. The Treasury were - the projections on this were based on an expectation of continued increases in the consumption of alcopops, and that this measure would reduce the rate of increase in the consumption of alcopops. Hopefully it'll actually reduce it in absolute terms..

MADONNA KING: [Interrupts] So, it..

CRAIG EMERSON: .but that's the fudge that the Liberal Party's been on about, but it's always been.

MADONNA KING: All right, but..

CRAIG EMERSON: The suggestion from us and from the experts and from the Treasury, is that this would have an effect on the consumption that otherwise would have occurred...

MADONNA KING: But are you - but are you going to listen to what this committee finds?

CRAIG EMERSON: Of course we will.

MADONNA KING: This - and so, would you rule out making a change?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, there's no expectation of a change. This is in the Budget, it's being supported by health experts..

MADONNA KING: So why listen to the committee?

CRAIG EMERSON: .al around Australia.

We'll listen to the - well, Madonna, we have brought down a Budget, and the Coalition is intent on pulling \$22 billion out of that Budget. We know that that would be very damaging to the macro-economic situation in Australia; that is, to inflation and interest rates. The Coalition is just practising Fairytale Economics where it doesn't matter whether you rein in expenditure or it doesn't matter whether you have a surplus or not.

GEORGE BRANDIS:I think we're back into the boiler plate rhetoric phase here. Look, you know, the real problem is that we're having this discussion now after the decision's been made. These considerations should have been taken into account by the Government before the decision was made, and in particular, the effect of substitution of alcopops with another form of liquor.

MADONNA KING: That's Senator George Brandis you're listening to this morning, as we go inside Canberra, and Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Government.

To roads now, gentlemen, the RACQ in about, oh, 32 minutes, is releasing its list of 360 substandard or inadequate roads in this state. And we'll look at this, if you're at home, staying listening after 10, and I'll tell you more about it.

But what's the road you two would nominate as the worst in Queensland?

CRAIG EMERSON: I think it's an intersection actually, between Kessels and Mains Road, and.

MADONNA KING: [Interrupts] Yeah, that's been raised before, hasn't it?

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, and it's been a problem for, oh well, 15 years. There needs to be some sort of overpass, underpass arrangement because.

MADONNA KING: [Interrupts] What suburb is that in, Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: It'd be Macgregor, or it's..

MADONNA KING: Okay.

CRAIG EMERSON: .alittle bit closer to the city than Sunnybank, so heading towards Mt Gravatt, on Mains Road.

MADONNA KING: So, the corner of Kessels Road.

CRAIG EMERSON: [Interrupts] Kessels and Mains, it's a shocker.

MADONNA KING: George Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I've got an intersection too, and that's the well known bottlenecks going onto Airport Drive, which - where the freeway crosses the road that you go onto to go out to the airport.

I also think, by the way, just driving here this morning, Madonna, that Milton Road is really a shocking mess.

MADONNA KING: And Milton Road you can't actually extend - there's no way of actually increasing that either, is there?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I mean, what the Lord Mayor wants to do of course is, is, take the pressure off that road and the other roads in the inner Western part of the city, with one of his tunnels.

MADONNA KING: All right, moving from roads, and we'll add Airport Drive - have either of you missed a plane to Canberra because of Airport Drive?

GEORGE BRANDIS: I haven't, but I've come very close a couple of times.

MADONNA KING: Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: Me too. I do remember one thing that John Howard said about all this. He never ran for a plane - I get philosophical about these things, you're either going to get it or you aren't, and you, you know. But I think a lot of people would miss those planes because you can get absolutely jammed. We know the Gateway is being duplicated, but you - how many times does a truck break down on the bridge? And I'm told by people the reason is that you think, it just can't be coincidence, that when they've

got very little fuel in their tanks, they go up, and then, there's just no, you know, the fuel goes to the back of the tank and they break down, smack bang in the middle of the Gateway Bridge. So that's another big problem, but that one is being fixed.

MADONNA KING: Yeah, you know, I suspect that there are two kinds of people in the world: people who would never miss a plane, and people who are likely to miss a plane. And in my marriage, I'm the one there an hour early, and if we're not there an hour early, I'm having a panic attack. My husband is still considering packing an hour before the plane leaves.

CRAIG EMERSON: I think I'm with your husband.

MADONNA KING: [Laughs] Sounds like you are too, George Brandis, if you've almost missed a couple of planes.

GEORGE BRANDIS: I have certainly almost missed a couple of planes.

MADONNA KING: Can I just get you to sit tight? Let's cross to Francine Norton in the news room, and we'll be back in Inside Canberra in just a moment. [Unrelated items]

MADONNA KING: Josh from Alexandra Hills called in. Thanks, Josh. He's 21. He used to drink a six-pack of scotch and cola cans each weekend. Now he buys a whole bottle and usually ends up drinking that just because it's there.

We're going Inside Canberra this morning with Senator George Brandis, Opposition Attorney-General, and Dr Craig Emerson. He's the Minister for Small Business in the Rudd Government.

And gentlemen, we were talking about roads. I don't want to spend each Wednesday talking about fuel prices, but two truck drivers were actually killed on picket lines in Spain and Portugal overnight as strikes continued over the soaring fuel prices there. It's turned really ugly. Are either of you worried that this type of thing is going to happen in Australia?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, all I can say is I hope not. The - but the price is extraordinary. I think it's \$139 a barrel for oil. And you're talking about the airline industry with Martin Ferguson in Brisbane today. Jet fuel is \$165 a barrel, so these are astronomical prices.

MADONNA KING: I should say as you say that, I saw where Virgin Blue this morning has dismissed speculation that it could go out of business or suffer big problems..

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah.

MADONNA KING: They all say it's a challenge that they will meet.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah.

MADONNA KING: But I filled my little car the other day, \$65. My husband has just a family sedan.

CRAIG EMERSON: [Interrupts] Did you add it to the mortgage. [Laughs]

MADONNA KING: Well, and the family sedan and it cost \$100 to fill.

CRAIG EMERSON: Mm.

GEORGE BRANDIS: I think that's everybody's experience at the moment. I had exactly the same experience myself at the petrol station on Sunday. And I've got to say, I mean, you know, I know you'd - this might sound like a politician's point, but..

CRAIG EMERSON: [Interrupts] Ah, George, it's just so unlike you.

GEORGE BRANDIS:..but Craig, let me remind you, I don't need to remind Madonna because she was here but for weeks on end, Wayne Swan and I sat in this studio before the last federal election, and Wayne Swan said again and again and again, weeks on end, if the Rudd - if Rudd and the Labor Party are elected on 24 November, we will do something about petrol prices.

MADONNA KING: But what can they do? Isn't it world oil prices?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, it largely is, Madonna. It largely is world oil prices. But the point I'm making is a different point, and that is, people who voted Labor at the last election did so because they believed on the basis of the sorts of statements that Wayne Swan made on your program and Kevin Rudd made and no doubt you too, Craig, made, that a Labor Government would have more success at tackling petrol prices than the former Government did, and they were conned and they know it and they're furious and they're entitled to be.

MADONNA KING: Are you getting any complaints to your office over fuel prices along those lines, Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: Actually, no. I get complaints about other matters but not so much on the fuel price. I think people do understand it's world oil prices, George. What Wayne Swan and others said is we would do what we can that is within our control. You know, all your listeners know that world oil prices...

GEORGE BRANDIS:[Interrupts] There were no such caveats on what Wayne Swan said, Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: And you asserted at the last time that Wayne Swan said he'd bring petrol prices down. He never did that, so let's get real. We do have a real issue here, it's going to affect the economy more generally, however.

MADONNA KING: Will we see that two dollars..

GEORGE BRANDIS:[Interrupts] Well, can I ask you - can I ask one question .

CRAIG EMERSON: Madonna, could I...

GEORGE BRANDIS: to Craig, though? Can I ask this question to Craig? If what you say is right, then why did the Labor Party choose to make such a big issue of petrol prices at the time of the last federal election?

CRAIG EMERSON: Because there are things that can be done around the edges, and we said we would do them and your party was uninterested in doing that, George. Now, you're just going to have to get over that election loss, mate.

I need to make some - a point about Virgin though, if I could very quickly, Madonna. I was at a small business function last night and they are absolutely livid at these suggestions. They're going pretty strong, they say. All airlines are grappling with this problem of \$165 a barrel of jet fuel and it doesn't do anyone any good to be talking down our airlines at a difficult time like this.

MADONNA KING: All right. Can I ask you at home - you've heard George Brandis and Craig Emerson, probably the only point of disagreement this morning, if you voted for Labor or you voted for Labor for the first time, how much did that suggestion - or did you see that there was a suggestion that things like petrol prices would come down, do you blame the Labor Government for not doing enough now it's elected, or do you see it as a matter of world oil prices?

GEORGE BRANDIS:[Interrupts] By the way, by the way...

MADONNA KING: Now, no, can I move on to the next thing or we'll be running out of time? Brisbane. It's now less liveable, according to the latest survey, than Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. Could that be true, George Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I - when I saw that survey this morning, I saw it - see that Brisbane is only one space ahead of Tokyo in liveability, and I'm very sceptical of that. I mean, there are different surveys, and I remember there was one about a year ago in which Brisbane was, I think, eleventh in the world, and this other survey has..

MADONNA KING: [Interrupts] We're 34.

GEORGE BRANDIS:.. a number 34.

MADONNA KING: But let me get you to pick between Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide. Honestly. People say Sydney is, you know, the most beautiful city in the world. Melbourne, the fashion capital. Perth, if you're not looking for real estate, stunning country town on the sea. Adelaide..

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I think all the Australian capitals have their particular charms, but I think anybody who's - who lives in Brisbane and, you know, people are voting with their feet by coming to live in Brisbane. They're not fleeing to Adelaide, for instance.

MADONNA KING: Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, I'd pick up on the last point and agree with George there. There is a big migration to Brisbane and south-east Queensland more generally. That actually is putting a few strains on the place with traffic and just the growing pains, generally.

There is a big infrastructure program that is underway. We've talked about the Gateway duplication, a lot of other road works and so on.

I think it is growing pains, but I'd say that Brisbane is the most liveable city in Australia and the survey's wrong.

MADONNA KING: Yeah, you know everywhere I've travelled, coming home, flying back into Brisbane or even when I worked down south, you kind of fly back into that Brisbane Airport and it's where I actually feel I'm home.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I've - I think that's the - that's a feeling that we all have. But, you know, one of the things that makes Brisbane such an attractive city is because the infrastructure - the cultural infrastructure, the sporting infrastructure of the city are very strong, and also now Brisbane is becoming acknowledged as a centre of educational excellence, with the University of Queensland, for instance, becoming - being marked at - as number three of the 39 Australian universities, which is a great thing.

MADONNA KING: I'm going to be cheeky here, we had an outside broadcast at the Gallery of Modern Art on Monday, and I asked a question to Chris Bombalos and Rod Welford, what would you choose, to go to the opening of the Picasso exhibition at GOMA or tonight's State of Origin match? Craig Emerson, how would you respond to that?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, I know what Bomber would've said. Look, I'd go to the Origin match, actually. I'm - I like the Impressionists more, Monet and those sorts of characters, so - but given the choice, I'd be out there, barracking for the Maroons in the State of Origin match.

MADONNA KING: George Brandis, former Sports Minister?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, what you're doing Madonna, is haunting me with a dilemma.

CRAIG EMERSON: [Laughs]

GEORGE BRANDIS: That I had to face all last year as Minister for the Arts and Sport, when people constantly asked me, well, which of the - which would you prefer over the other, and I always dodged the question because.

MADONNA KING: [Interrupts] So ans.

GEORGE BRANDIS: They're both important.

MADONNA KING: Well, answer the question today.

CRAIG EMERSON: Get off the fence, George.

MADONNA KING: Get off your fence, George.

GEORGE BRANDIS: [Laughs] Well, because the opening of the Picasso exhibition was a couple of nights ago, and the State of Origin game is tonight, so I don't have to choose.

CRAIG EMERSON: So George would do both.

MADONNA KING: Are you going to the State of Origin?

GEORGE BRANDIS: No, I'm not.

MADONNA KING: Have you gone to Picasso?

GEORGE BRANDIS: No, I was invited to the Picasso opening, in fact, but I had a family commitment so I.

MADONNA KING: Will you be going to the Picasso?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Oh yeah, absolutely.

MADONNA KING: Will you be going to either of the last two State of Origins?

GEORGE BRANDIS: I'm not sure.

MADONNA KING: Can't trick him out, can we, Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: No, no, he's hard to catch.

GEORGE BRANDIS: [Laughs]

MADONNA KING: [Laughs] Great point to leave it. Gentlemen, thank you.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Thanks a lot. Bye.

CRAIG EMERSON: Okay, thanks very much.

MADONNA KING: Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government, and Senator George Brandis. He's the spokesman on Attorney-General's matters - Attorneys-General matters for the Coalition.

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